



Driver's Evaluation and Training for Students with Disabilities

A Guide for Transition Planning



May 2012



BACKGROUND

This guide, published by Nebraska VR, was developed to examine issues related to driver's evaluation and training for students with disabilities. It is intended to reflect current practices, resources, and guidance for educators, parents, and service providers. It is hoped that this guide will assist in answering questions related to this important topic.



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INTRODUCTION

A driver's license! This is the passport to freedom that most teens anxiously await. Driving is often viewed as one of the first steps in the journey to adulthood and an important rite of passage. While this journey may be different for youth with disabilities than for those without disabilities, the need to experience the freedom of driving is equally strong.

A driver's license plays a significant role in daily living. Having a driver's license can mean independence and a decreased reliance on others for transportation. Access to employment, educational services, independent living, and community activities is limited without adequate transportation. Complicating this is the fact that Nebraska is similar to many other states in that it has a limited public transportation system that does not fully meet the needs of its population, particularly those with disabilities.

In an attempt to assist students with disabilities and those close to them in addressing issues related to obtaining a driver's license, this guide has been developed to:

- Provide information on the topic of driver's evaluation, training, and licensing as it relates to students with disabilities.
- Provide information regarding laws and regulations that relate to licensing for students with disabilities.
- Provide guidance to assist students with disabilities, their families, and educators in determining the youth's abilities and needs related to obtaining a driver's license.
- Provide suggestions for resources to assist in obtaining needed services related to driving.

SETTING GOALS

For students with physical, intellectual, or developmental disabilities, it is important to consider early on (well before age 16) whether driving is a reasonable goal. There are a number of critical questions that should be examined before making this decision. Such questions include:

- Does the student want to drive?
- Does the student understand that living independently in the community, attending college, and getting a job are all impacted by transportation needs?
- Does the student know what will happen when mom and dad aren't available to drive them?
- Does the student have the requisite skills to drive?
- What resources and services are available to assist in gaining the skills needed to drive?
- Are there fears or concerns (either on the part of the student or parents) about driving that need to be addressed?

Students often turn to their parents for help in identifying their goals and making important decisions. Parents, however, may not be sure what a reasonable expectation is for their son or daughter in regard to driving and may turn to teachers, doctors, or others for assistance. Parents will generally be cautious, but realistic, in determining the potential driving ability of their son or daughter. To develop a realistic picture, it is important to look at the challenges related to the physical and cognitive disabilities of the student, as well as the resources available to them.

CHALLENGES

It is not possible to list all of the potential challenges individuals with a disability might face related to their ability to drive. Challenges will vary by person. Further, those with physical disabilities will face different challenges than those with intellectual or developmental disabilities.

Physical Disabilities

Challenges for those with physical disabilities are often more readily apparent and accommodations may be easier to identify than for those with cognitive disabilities. Individuals with a physical disability may not be able to operate a vehicle, transfer in and out of a car, or load their wheelchair without assistance. If these tasks cannot be done independently, the individual may need someone to assist with these tasks or the vehicle may need modifications. The individual will need the skills to direct the person providing assistance or to operate the equipment on the vehicle. Examples of modifications that may be made to a vehicle include:

- wheelchair lifts
- hand controls
- extension levers
- raised floors
- repositioned gas or brake pedals
- joysticks for gas, brakes, or steering

While the options for modifications that may be made to a vehicle to accommodate a physical disability are many, the bigger challenge may be in identifying a method to pay for what may be a costly vehicle or equipment.

The presence of physical disabilities may result in concerns related to reaction time, coordination, visual perception, and visual processing. For instance, the startle reflex sometimes exhibited by those with cerebral palsy can make driving difficult. Or, the individual may not be able to complete the hand-over-hand movements necessary to turn the wheel of the car. The individual may not be able to move his or her head independent of the upper body or arms or visual perceptual problems can make it difficult to determine the car's position on the road.

Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities

Individuals with an intellectual or developmental disability may face a variety of challenges when it comes to driving. Questions to consider when evaluating the ability to drive for an individual with a cognitive disability include:

- Does the individual have the ability to read signs and to follow and understand directions?
- How well oriented is the individual? In other words, can she or he make it from Point A to Point B within the community?
- Does the individual have the ability to plan, organize and sequence the steps necessary to make quick decisions in unpredictable situations?
- Does the individual have the motor skills to effectively control the vehicle, including steering, braking, and accelerating?
- Does the individual exhibit the maturity, judgment, and decision-making skills critical to safely operating a vehicle and interacting with other drivers?

Financial Barriers

Students and their families may have difficulties paying the fees associated with driver's evaluation and training or the costs of modifying a vehicle. They may need assistance in locating resources to help meet these costs.

RULES, REGULATIONS, AND THE LAW

In order to determine if the student may be a candidate for driving, it is important to be aware of Nebraska laws regarding licensing. A brief overview of laws that may be relevant for the youth with a disability is provided here.

Graduated Licensing Requirements: The Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) has established a system of graduated licensing for all teens. This system specifies age, training, practice, and testing requirements for varying levels of permits and licenses. Levels included in the system are: School Learner's Permit, School Permit, Learner's Permit, and Provisional Operator's Permit. A complete description of licensing requirements is provided at: <http://www.dmv.ne.gov/examining/overview.html>.

Vision Requirements: Individuals may be issued a license or permit only when the vision requirements established by the DMV are met. This determination is based upon vision testing completed by the DMV. If the individual fails to meet the requirements on this test, documentation must be provided indicating the results of an examination by an optometrist or ophthalmologist current within 90 days. The DMV will use the results of this examination to determine if the individual qualifies for a license and to determine any restrictions to be placed upon the license. Restrictions related to vision may include requirements for specific glasses or lenses, restriction of the individual from driving at night, or requirements related to equipment on any vehicle driven by the individual.

Physical and Mental Capacity Requirements: Individuals applying for a driver's license must satisfy the DMV examiner that he or she possesses the sufficient physical and mental capacity to operate a vehicle with a reasonable degree of safety. If the examiner questions this capacity, the individual may be required to provide documentation from a physician indicating results of an examination current within 90 days (or less, if there has been a significant change since the last examination). Based upon these results, the DMV examiner may issue a limited license to the individual. Restrictions may be placed on driving conditions and/or special controls or equipment may be required to insure that the individual can safely operate a vehicle.

Specific information about vision and medical requirements are addressed in the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles' "Rules and Regulations Pertaining to the Vision and Medical Requirements for Class A and B Licenses, Learner's and School Permits". Regulations may be found at: http://www.sos.ne.gov/rules-and-regs/regsearch/Rules/Motor_Vehicles_Dept_of/Title-247/Chapter-7.pdf

TESTING ACCOMMODATIONS

The Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) assures that, in accordance with the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), the written driver's license examination and the Nebraska Drivers Manual may be made available in alternate formats. Additionally, an interpreter may be arranged for individuals with hearing impairments. This is addressed briefly on their website at: <http://www.dmv.ne.gov/examining/addsvrs.html>. While the DMV does not address specific requirements for obtaining accommodations and prefers to handle requests for accommodations on an individual basis, it is reasonable to expect that documentation from the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or medical records may be necessary to validate the need for accommodations.

The DMV requires that accommodations be requested in advance by contacting the local driver licensing office or state DMV office.

Driver Licensing Services
Nebraska State Office Building
301 Centennial Mall South
P.O. Box 94726
Lincoln, Nebraska 68509-4726
Phone: (402) 471-3861
Office Hours: 8:00-5:00 CDT (Mon-Fri)
By e-mail at: <http://www.dmv.ne.gov/examining/email>

ROLE OF THE TEAM

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) team plays a key role in assisting the student in developing goals for the future. Federal law (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, also known as IDEA) and State regulations (Rule 51 Regulations and Standards for Special Education Programs) require that transition services be provided to prepare the student for life after high school, including planning for postsecondary education or training, employment, and community living.

When developing the student's transition plan, it is important that the IEP team consider transportation needs and how they impact the student in achieving his or her goals. This cannot be overlooked, given that transportation is critical for employment, postsecondary education, independent living, and community activities. While there may be a variety of options available to meet the student's transportation needs, the least restrictive option is that in which the student has a driver's license and is able to provide his or her own transportation.

The obvious starting point for a student wishing to get a driver's license is enrollment in a driver's training program. However, it is possible that the student does not yet possess the requisite skills to participate in such a program. In that case, there may be activities to assist the student in obtaining those skills, with the long term goal of participation in a driver's training program. Examples of activities to address needs related to driving include:

- Perceptual problems may be addressed by teaching other skills that involve steering something through space. A starting point can be as simple as evaluating the student's ability to steer a bicycle or to manipulate controls on a computer or video game.
- Directional deficits may be addressed by teaching the student to find his or her way around the community.
- Activities to help the student be aware of sights, sounds, and feelings, as well as staying alert may be beneficial.
- Activities that assign specific responsibilities to the student may assist him or her in developing the maturity necessary to be a responsible driver.

- Encouraging parents to have the student sit in the front seat while riding as a passenger gives the youth the opportunity to observe the driver in action. Strategies such as having the student give directions, call out speed limits, or read road signs can provide valuable practice before getting behind the wheel.

Despite these activities, it may still be unclear whether the student possesses the skills and abilities necessary for driving. In fact, it may be unclear whether he or she should even attempt to take a driver's training course. This is where a Driver's Evaluation may be beneficial.

DRIVER'S EVALUATION

A Driver's Evaluation is a service provided by skilled professionals at a Driver's Evaluation and Training Center to assist in determining if an individual is capable of driving. Evaluation is a service offered separate from traditional models of driver's training and may include an evaluation completed by an Occupational Therapist.

A Driver's Evaluation may include the following assessments.

General Abilities Assessment: This includes assessment of skills such as reaction time; visual and perceptual skills; movement and control of hands, arms, and legs; ability to enter and exit a vehicle; problem-solving and judgment skills; and basic driving knowledge.

Driving Assessment: This involves assessing abilities behind the wheel, including the individual's application of basic driving skills and knowledge and the ability to safely maneuver a vehicle.

Accommodations Assessment: This assessment identifies needs for adaptive equipment and/or vehicle modifications necessary for the individual to safely operate a vehicle.

A Driver's Evaluation provides recommendations regarding the training and accommodations needed to obtain or improve driving skills. There are a number of Driver's Evaluation and Training Centers located across Nebraska, many affiliated with major hospitals. Their services are provided for a fee. A listing of these centers may be found at:

<http://www.dmv.ne.gov/examining/trngtest/com.html>.

DRIVER'S TRAINING

School districts in Nebraska handle the provision of driver's training for students with and without disabilities in a variety of ways. Some districts provide driver's training during the school day for all students as a part of the general curriculum. Students with disabilities who participate in the driver's training program may receive accommodations as identified in their IEP.

Examples of accommodations include, but are not limited to:

- extra hours of classroom or on-the-road instruction
- one-on-one instruction
- use of driving simulators
- assistance with reading materials and test-taking
- vehicle modifications

It should be noted that school districts do not typically provide accommodations in the form of special equipment for school vehicles, so those adaptations would need to be made on the student's or family's privately owned vehicle.

Most school districts, however, do not provide driver's training as part of the general curriculum. Instead, they provide it for a fee outside of the regular school calendar, either during after school hours or in the summer. This is the same for students with or without disabilities. Accommodations are made as identified in the IEP.

Some districts do not offer driver's training at all, but instead purchase this from other providers in the community or contract with a neighboring school district to provide the service. In these situations, the student and family are responsible for sharing information regarding needed accommodations with the driver's training program.

A listing of schools and agencies approved as Driver's Safety Schools in Nebraska may be obtained by contacting the Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles or by visiting their web site at: <http://www.dmv.ne.gov/examining/trngtest/pop.html>.

RESOURCES

Nebraska Assistive Technology Partnership

An excellent resource for Nebraskans is the Nebraska Assistive Technology Partnership (ATP). ATP provides a number of services related to the driving needs of persons with disabilities. ATP can provide assistance in locating and coordinating funding sources to assist with the cost of assessments for individual needs, modifications, evaluation, and training. Information regarding ATP and their services may be obtained by calling toll free at 888-806-6287 or by visiting their website at: <http://www.atp.ne.gov/>.

ATP works in partnership with Nebraska VR and, on a case-by-case basis, financial support may be available to promote independent transportation once other financial resources have been exhausted. Requirements include that the individual must have an approved Individualized Plan for Employment and a doctor's order. Persons eligible for Nebraska VR may work with their assigned VR staff member to receive approval for this service.

Additionally, ATP provides a listing of Nebraska Driver Evaluation Centers, as well as resources for adapting vehicles for accessibility. Visit their webpage for Resources for Accessible Transportation and Equipment at: <http://www.atp.ne.gov/docs/resources-vm.html>.

Websites

- **Nebraska Department of Motor Vehicles**
This site includes the Nebraska Driver's Manual, Practice Tests (including a version for the iPad); Teen Licensing Requirements; Driver Licensing Offices and Hours; and more. <http://www.dmv.state.ne.us/>
- **Keys2Drive: The AAA Guide to Teen Driver Safety**
A site developed by AAA. Select your state at the top of the home page to access information and tools to help parents and teens move through the process of learning to drive. <http://teendriving.aaa.com/NE/>
- **Learning Disabilities Association of America: Helping the Learning Disabled Adolescent Learn to Drive**
This article discusses issues related to helping the adolescent with a learning disability learn to drive. <http://www.ldanatl.org/aboutld/parents/help/drive.asp>

Free Apps

- **Driver's Ed**

App includes questions and answers regarding potential driving hazards and situations; tips and techniques to become a safer driver; and a review of 66 street signs.

- **New Driver Central**

App includes a practice test and links to the websites for the Department of Motor Vehicles in each state.